DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 167 888 CG 013 285

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TITLE Self-Blame in Rape Victims: A Control-Maintenance Strategy.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (86th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1978) ; Parts marginally legible due to print quality

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attribution Theory; *Behavior Patterns; Crime; Females; Individual Characteristics; *Locus of Control; *Rape; *Reactive Behavior; *Self Control; *Self Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Two types of self-blame were investigated: characterological self-blame, corresponding to the popular negative view of self-blame; and behavioral self-blame, representing a positive attempt to reestablish a belief in control. Results of a questionnaire completed by rape crisis centers located across the country attest to the pervasiveness of self-blame among rape victims, yet indicate that victims of rape are far more likely to engage in behavioral self-blame than characterological self-blame. (Author)

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APA, Toronto, 1978

Self-Blame in Rape Victims: A Control-Maintenance Strategy

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The pervasiveness of self-blame is well-documented in the rape literature (see, e.g., Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974a, 1974b, 1976; Bryant & Cirel, 1977; Griffin, 1971; Hursch, 1977; Weis & Weis, 1975). While fear (of injury, death, and the rapist) is the primary reaction to rape experience by victims, self-blame may be second only to fear in frequency of occurrence. Self-blame is far more common than anger; "Interestingly, anger does not seem to be a main component of the victim's initial reaction. She appears to feel responsible in spite of her feelings of helplessness and fear (Calhoun, Selby, & King, 1976, p. 123)."

In considering the few facts which exist on victim precipitation in the crime of rape, however, it becomes obvious that the victims' attributional strategies (i.e., self-blame) do not reflect an accurate appraisal of the woman's causal role in the assault. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1969) concluded that only 4.4% of rapes are victim precipitated. A higher figure, 19%, has been proposed by Amir (1971), who used a considerably broader definition in establishing his criteria for victim precipitation. The discrepancy between the National Commission's findings and those of Amir may be due to the greater discretion afforded the data-interpreter by Amir's broader definition, which included such criteria as "risky situations marred with sexuality." Still, it is of particular note that neither 4.4% nor 19% represents a majority of rape situations, yet the rape literature, in discussing the pervasivness of self-blame among victims, appears to generalize from the

experiences of most rape victims.

Self-blame by rape victims does not reflect a realistic appraisal of the role played by the woman in the assault. How, then, can one account for the pervasiveness of such feelings? A familiar response is that women have been socialized to accept blame for their own victimization, or, as Brownmiller (1975) suggests, we are conditioned to a female victim mentality. Brownmiller discusses the psychologies of Deutsch and Horney, who both view masochism as a feminine trait (though considered culturally induced by Horney, but the result of biology to Deutsch) and concludes that this masochism is an integral part of female socialization. In the particular case of rape, women have fallen prey to the internalization of myths, including "All women want to be raped" and "No woman can be raped against her will." Burgess and Holmstrom (1974a) consider self-blame a manifestation of women's socialization to the attitude of "blaming the victim," a perspective also shared by Bryant and Cirel(1977). While this socialization hypothesis strikes a familiar chord and no doubt suggests much that is true, it may paint a very incomplete picture of the factor(s) responsible for self-blame in the rape victim. It fits nicely with the portrait of women as helpless and masochistic, incapable of displaying anger towards others and therefore directing it towards themselves, and may unwittingly perpetuate a view of women too consistent with the role of rape victim. Particularly, this view overlooks the possibility that, oddly enough, self-blame may represent a positive, rather than a negative, impulse by women who have been raped; it may represent a positive attempt to cope with the trauma of rape.

Self-Blame and the Need for Control

The primary basis for the assumption that self-blame may represent a positive psychological mechanism derives from the implications of self-blame

for a belief in control over important life events. The social psychological literature has repeatedly demonstrated the advantages of perceived control. Experimental studies have found that a perception of control over impending aversive events reduces the aversiveness of such events (Bowers, 1968; Glass & Singer, 1972); control over their environment enhances the well-being of the elderly and prolongs their lifespan (Langer & Rodin, 1976; Rodin & Langer, 1977; Schulz, 1976); experiences with uncontrollable outcomes brings about a state of helplessness and may be at the root of depression (Seligman, 1975).

A common reaction to rape is the feeling of a loss of control over one's life (Bard & Ellison, 1974; Bryant & Cirel, 1977). The woman does not feel sure of herself and questions her self-determination. She not only needs understanding and empathy from others, but needs to feel a sense of control (Hilberman, 1976). She feels uncomfortable living in a world in which she has so little control over important life events, a world in which she feels extremely vulnerable, and, in particular, fears the rapist and a recurrence of rape. If a woman wishes to maintain a sense of control over her life, while simultaneously attempting to believe in the avoidability of a future rape, the target she blames for the rape is likely to be influenced by these motivations. What target is more likely to imply future avoidability and control than oneself? As Medea and Thompson (1974) write, "If the woman can believe that somehow she got herself into the situation, if she can feel that in some way she caused it, if she can make herself responsible for it, then she's established some sort of control over rape. It wasn't someone arbitrarily smashing into her life and wreaking havoc (p. 105)."

Two Types of Self-Blame

The suggestion that adaptive motivations may lie behind self-blame must neverthless take into account the more common negative conceptions of the phenomenon, by which self-blame is regarded as maladaptive, a precursor of psychological problems, and a component of depression (see Beck, 1967). Actually, self-blame may be a label for two very different attributional strategies, both self-attributions, but with very different implications for personal control. That is, a victim could blame herself for the kind of person she is, thereby faulting her character or certain personality traits, which would reflect upon her perceived worth as a person. On the other hand, she could blame herself for having engaged in a particular activity, or having failed to engage in a particular activity, thereby blaming herself for certain past behaviors; this strategy could have considerably less effect on the victim's total evaluation of herself as a person. To facilitate discussion of these two self-attributional strategies, the former will be labeled "characterological" self-blame and the latter "behavioral" self-blame. Whereas in the case of characterological blame the victim seems concerned with questions of deservingness in the past, in the case of behavioral blame the victim seems concerned with questions of avoidability in the future; characterological self-blame is more clearly associated with the negative conception of self-blame and is relatively consistent with an image of masochistic womanhood. If, on the other hand, a woman engages in behavioral self-blame, this does not necessarily imply that she believes she deserved to be raped; rather, it suggests that she believes by altering her behavior in the future she will be able to avoid a recurrence of rape. In an attempt to reestablish a sense of control, the woman searches to identify those behaviors -- acts or omissions -- for which she can blame herself, activities which she can

believe, if carried out differently, could have enabled her to avoid the rape and will thereby enable her to avoid a repeat episode.

While the distinction between characterological and behavioral self-blame appears related to the state-trait distinction in clinical psychology (see, e.g., Spielberger, 1972), it more specifically corresponds to the distinctions drawn by Weiner and his colleagues (Weiner, Frieze, et. al., 1971) in their scheme of attributions in the area of achievement; in attributing failure to oneself (internal attribution), one can point to his/her own lack of ability or effort. Generally, it has been found that individuals who are highly motivated to succeed attribute failure to a lack of effort, while those with low achievement needs attribute failure to a lack of ability (Weiner, Frieze, et. al., 1971). It appears that ability and effort attributions have very different implications for perceived control; individuals who make an attribution to poor ability believe that there is little they can do to control the situation and succeed, for ability is stable and relatively unchangeable. Effort attributions, on the other hand, will lead one to believe that as long as s/he tries harder, s/he will be able to control outcomes in a positive manner (see Dweck, 1975). Likewise, characterological self-blame corresponds to an ability attribution, and behavioral self-blame corresponds to an effort attribution, having very different implications for perceived personal control. While the dimension used by Weiner and his colleagues to distinguish between ability and effort is that of stability (stable-unstable), the differences between the attributions may also be captured through the use of a controllability (controllable-uncontrollable) dimension.[1]

This rudimentary analysis would contend that an individual who attributes her victimization to modifiable behavior (e.g., I should not have

walked alone; I should have locked the windows) will maintain a belief in future control and a consequent belief in her ability to avoid a similar misfortune in the future. If one's victimization is attributed to an internal, more-or-less unchangeable factor, such as one's character or personality (e.g., I'm the type of person who attracts rapists; I'm a weak person and can't say no), the victim will be considerably less likely to believe that she is capable of alleviating her vulnerability in the future and may begin to perceive herself as a chronic victim.

Rape Crisis Center Questionnaire

According to the above schema, behavioral self-blame represents a cognitive strategy reflecting adaptive impulses, whereas characterological self-blame represents a maladaptive course. While the popular image of the rape victim is that of a woman believing she is a worthless person, results of a recent survey study suggest that behavioral self-blame may be far more representative of the type of blame engaged in by women who have been raped. Since the rape literature makes no blame distinctions and is therefore not very helpful in this context, a brief questionnaire was devised which was then sent to rape crisis centers across the country. Center names were derived primarily from a list of same in a fairly recent federal report on rape and its victims (Brodyaga, Gates, et. al., 1975), and were supplemented by names of rape crisis centers found in an informal directory at a local Women's Center; services which were hotlines only or were task forces without counseling services were excluded from the final list. In all, questionnaires were mailed to 120 rape crisis centers, representing services in 37 states and the District of Columbia. Thirty of the questionnaires were returned "addressee unknown." Of the remaining 90 crisis centers, 48 responded. Thus, including the 30 unreceived questionnaires, the return rate was 40%; considering only the 90 that were presumably received by the centers, the

return rate was 53%.

In a cover letter I identified myself as a social psychologist interested in the nature of self-blame among victims of rape, and the letter recipients were asked to base their questionnaire responses on their experiences as counselors of rape victims. The questionnaire items dealt primarily with the issue of self-blame. Crisis centers were asked to indicate approximately how many rape victims they see yearly, and, of those they see, the percentage who blame themselves, at least in part, for the rape. The behavioral self-blame question asked, "Of the rape victims you see, what percentage blame themselves for the rape because of some behavior (act or omission) they engaged in at the time of or immediately prior to the rape (e.g., "I should not have walked alone," "I should not have hitchhiked," "I should have locked my windows")? The crisis centers were then asked to provide specific examples of behavioral self-blame related by the women they have counseled. The characterological self-blame question asked, "Of the rape victims you see, what percentage blame themselves for the rape because of some character trait or personality "flaw" they believe they have (e.g., "I was so stupid, I deserved to be raped," "I'm the kind of woman who attracts rapists," "I am a weak person and can't say no")? Specific examples of this type of blame were then requested as well. The centers were also asked to indicate on two 7-point scales, with endpoints "almost not at all" and "completely," how much self-blaming characterized the women who, respectively, engaged in behavioral and characterological blame; this was included in order to ascertain whether behavioral and characterological self-blamers differ in terms of the amount of self-blame they attribute to themselves for the rape.

Of the 48 rape crisis centers who responded, 38 of them completed the questionnaire, six wrote letters providing general comments, and four wrote that they did not provide direct counseling services and were therefore

unable to complte the items. Results were therefore based on the completed questionnaires of 38 centers, located in 24 states and the District of Columbia. The centers differed markedly in the scope of their operation, with the three smallestserving 12, 30, and 40 rape victims yearly, and the three largest serving 1200, 1250, and 1500; the mean number of rape victims seen across the centers was 335.

In general, self-blame was reported as quite common; the reported mean percentage of women who blamed themselves, at least in part, for the rape was 74%. Of those who blamed themselves, behavioral self-blame was reported as considerably more common than characterological self-blame, and the difference between the the reported incidence of the two blaming strategies was very significant, $t(32) = 11.87$, $p < .001$; an average of 69% of the women blamed themselves behaviorally, whereas an average of 19% blamed themselves characterologically. Further, examples of the two types of self-blame provided by the Rape Crisis Centers confirmed the fact that they were readily able to distinguish between the two. Frequently mentioned examples of behavioral self-blame included the following: I should not have hitchhiked, I shouldn't have walked alone (in that neighborhood), I shouldn't have let someone I didn't know into the house, I shouldn't have been out that late, I shouldn't have left my window open, I should not have gone to his apartment, I should have locked the car. Examples of characterological self-blame that were frequently reported included: I'm too trusting, I'm a weak person, I'm too naive and gullible, I'm the kind of person who attracts trouble, I'm not a very aware person, I'm not at all assertive -- I can't say no, I'm immature and can't take care of myself, I'm not a good judge of character, I'm basically a bad person. It is interesting to note that examples of behavioral self-blame were reported in the past tense (i.e., I should have/should not have), whereas examples of characterological self-

blame were presented in the present tense (i.e., I am/am not), perhaps implicitly indicating the presumed modifiability/non-modifiability of factors associated with behavioral and characterological self-blame respectively.

In responding to how much women blamed themselves for the rape, the centers reported that characterological self-blamers blamed themselves significantly more for the rape than did behavioral self-blamers (3.92 vs. 3.23, $t(25)$ 3.36, p .002). Overall, then, almost three-quarters of the women seen at the crisis centers blamed themselves, at least in part, for the rape. The self-blame expressed was far more likely to be of the behavioral self-blame type than of the characterological sort, yet the women who engaged in the latter blaming strategy were likely to blame themselves more for the rape than were behavioral self-blamers.

Implications and Conclusions

The rape crisis center questionnaire results indicate that while the majority of women do exhibit self-blame following rape, the focus of this self-attribution is a behavioral act or omission engaged in at the time of (or immediately preceding) the rape. Fewer than one-fifth of the women served by the centers blamed themselves in a characterological way, evidence that the "popular" view of the masochistic rape victim who perceives herself as worthless is largely unfounded. Rather, the self-blame in which most rape victims engage may represent a control-maintenance strategy, a functional response to a traumatic event. Evidence of the potential adaptive role of self-blame has been found in a study by Bulman and Wortman (1977), in which self-blame (general measure) emerged as a predictor of good coping among individuals who had been paralyzed in freak accidents. A desire to re-establish a belief in a controllable world, one in which the randomness of events is minimized, seems more apt to underlie the self-blame of rape victims

than is a deep-seated negative view of themselves.

Counseling techniques for rape victims frequently include repeatedly telling a woman that there is nothing she could have done to avoid the rape, that it was entirely the rapist's doing and outside of her control. These statements are meant to be reassuring, and in light of these "facts" self-blame is regarded as entirely unnecessary and generally harmful. However, if a woman is engaging in behavioral self-blame and is consequently blaming herself for control-maintenance reasons, such a counseling strategy would presumably be anything but reassuring. Rather, from this perspective, counselors should recognize the functional value of self-blame and concentrate on enabling the victim to reestablish a belief in her relative control over life outcomes (e.g., discussing possible ways of minimizing the likelihood of a future rape). Too often self-blame is blindly regarded as detrimental to mental health; rather, it may serve as a cue to the victim's psychological needs at the time.

In suggesting that behavioral self-blame reflects therapeutic, positive impulses in rape victims, there is no intention of implying that the rape was at all the woman's fault. Further, it is likely that a woman who engages in behavioral self-blame does not do so to the exclusion of blaming the rapist, society, or other factors; these blame attributions, instead, would stem from different motivations, control-maintenance being the motivation behind the self-blame. Since the phrase "self-blame" so readily connotes a maladaptive, negative mental state, it would perhaps be desirable to provide a more neutral label, such as "self-control attribution," for behavioral self-blame. In the case of rape, this would certainly render more politically palatable the proposition that behavioral self-blame (i.e., self-control attribution) is of functional value for the rape victim; the

new label would foster a recognition of the control function of behavioral self-blame, without implying a judgement regarding deservingness or fault. Further, it would conceivably forestall the perpetuation of a masochistic image of womanhood. Use of the phrase "self-blame" to denote both behavioral and characterological self-attributions may not only blur important distinctions between adaptive and maladaptive responses to a traumatic event, but may also preclude a heightened sensitivity to the acute control needs of women who have been raped.

Footnote

1. Recently, Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) reformulated the phenomenon of learned helplessness in terms of an attributional model and added a global-specific dimension to the internal-external and stable-unstable dimensions originally proposed by Weiner et. al. (1971). Using this model, characterological self-blame would represent an internal, stable, global attribution, and behavioral self-blame would correspond to an internal, unstable, specific attribution. The utility of the extra cells by Abramson et. al. may be called into question, however, for it is conceivable that the more global an attribution, the more likely it will be perceived as stable (and vice versa), and thus stability and specificity may not be independent dimensions of an attribution.

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